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Empower Adolescent Writers with Ongoing Choice in Purpose, Audience, Topic, and Genre

Lauren Heimlich Foley

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LAUREN HEIMLICH FOLEY

An electrified silence settled over our class like a blanket of early-morning, spring mist. My seventh-grade students' eyes—eager yet disbelieving—revealed their genuine excitement. Darrin's hand rocketed to the sky to clarify: "We can write about anything, in any genre?"

Before I answered, my mind flashed to a September mini-lesson. Students' moans haunted me: "Not another personal narrative. . . . We write one every year." To their relief, and my own, I explained that they would be studying a variety of narratives and would have the opportunity to explore at least one that interested them. Buy-in occurred almost instantaneously once choice entered into the equation. Now I wondered if my students would relish the freedom that Self-Selected Writing (SSW) would offer them. I replied, "Yes," with one stipulation, "work must be school-appropriate." And then, voices from around the room rose up:

"What about a book?"

"A poem?"

"A PowerPoint?"

"Even an article?"

Again and again, I answered yes.

Afterwards, a tangible hum ran through our room as students held conferences or resumed writing, considering what might become their SSW Pieces.

Implementing SSW

The concept of SSW emerged from the depths of a stifling curriculum. Seven years ago, the school where I worked adopted a yearlong, monthly writing map of genre studies. Beforehand, self-directed writing served as an integral part of my workshop. After each whole-class assignment, students participated in a SSW unit (six to eight each school year). However, with the strict genre study schedule, teacher-directed and student-directed writing products could not co-exist as they once did. Seeking a way to simultaneously balance my district's curriculum with my educational philosophy, I transformed my classroom. I wrestled with what mattered most to me as a writer and teacher: student writing, life-long learning, differentiation, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and student-centered instruction. As I carved out time for student-centered writing on Fridays, my adolescent writers generated products with choice in purpose, audience, topic, and genre from conception to publication.

I maintained a daily workshop model with mini-lessons supporting Common Core Standards and district requirements. Over time my weekly structure evolved, as shown in Figure 1. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday periods explored whole-class units such as genre studies, book clubs, novel studies, and research assignments. While students read at the start of every class and I held one-on-one conferences during this time, I discovered that students required ongoing time dedicated to writing about, analyzing, and discussing their independent reading books. Thursday Reading Workshop followed the guidelines and procedures outlined by Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998/2014) and *The Reading Zone* (2016) as well as Penny Kittle's *Book Love* (2013). Our Reading Workshop focused on skills to enhance students' reading and writing through the use of their independent reading books. I designed our week so that the work students completed Monday through Thursday could be incorporated into their writing on Friday. While students worked on different products throughout the school year, unifying objectives, which explored mentor texts (Fletcher, 2011), genre exploration, language and punctuation experimentation, and risk-taking guided students' progress.

Monday, Tuesday, & Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Independent Reading	Independent Reading	Independent Reading
Mini-lesson and/or Quick Write	Mini-lesson and/or Quick Write	Mini-lesson and/or Quick Write
Status of the Class/Book Talk/Pep Talk	Status of the Class/Book Talk/Pep Talk	Status of the Class/Book Talk/Pep Talk
Work Time with Conferences or Small-Group Instruction: **Genre Studies** **Book Clubs** **Whole-Class Texts** **Research**	Work Time with Conferences or Small-Group Instruction: **Reading Workshop**	Work Time with Conferences or Small-Group Instruction: **Self-Selected Writing**
Share and Close	Share and Close	Share and Close

Figure 1. Weekly workshop structure. This figure illustrates how I balance district-required texts and genres studies with a writing-reading workshop that honors independent reading and Self-Selected Writing.

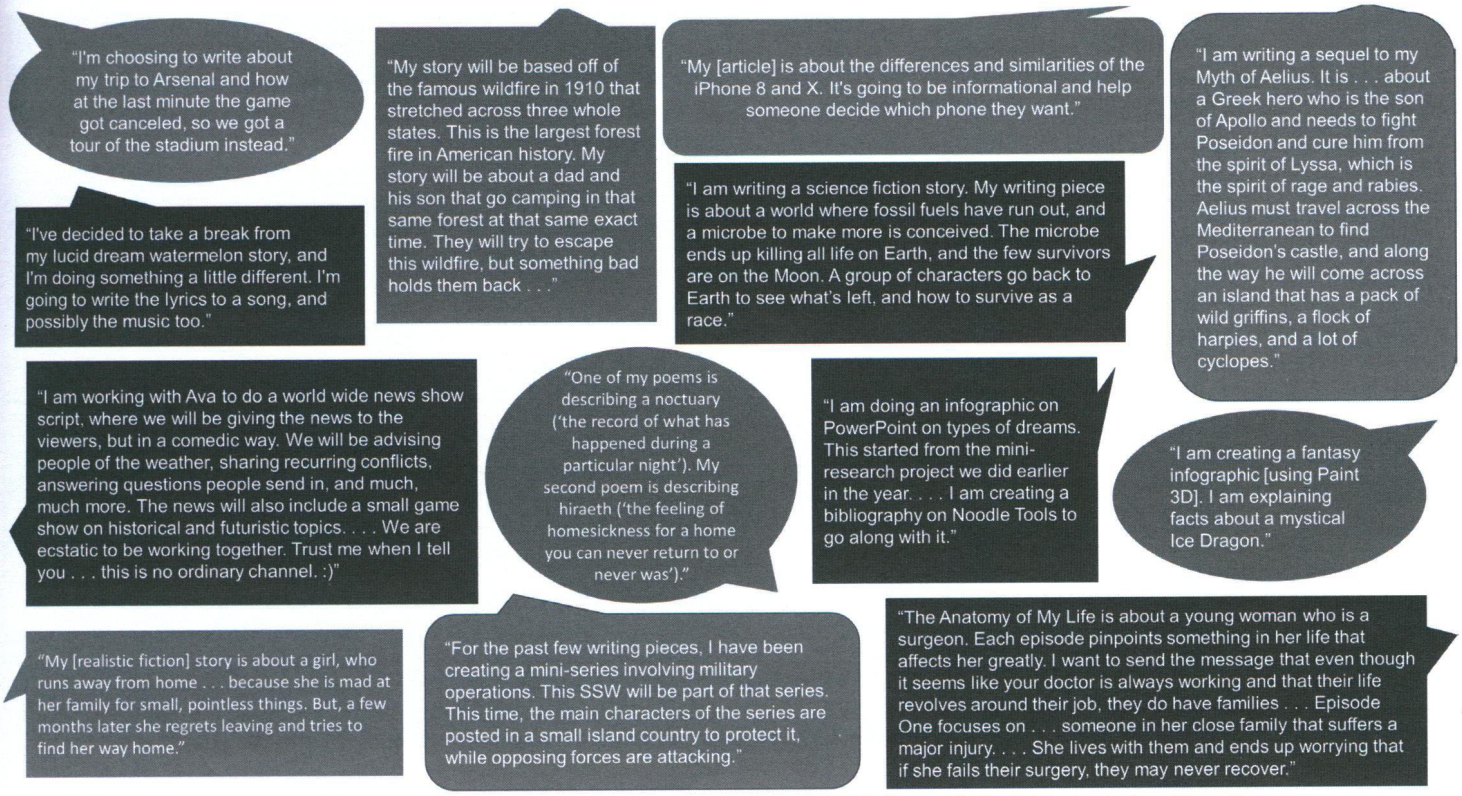

Figure 2. Student writing proposals. This figure highlights excerpts from students Topic and Genre Selection Forms submitted at the beginning of the writing process.

Action Research

I believed that weekly SSW, grounded in the work of Donald H. Graves (1983), Nancie Atwell (1998/2014), and Penny Kittle (2008) offered unique learning opportunities for adolescent writers. It aligned with, and extended, Ralph Fletcher's (2017) Greenbelt Writing, "a wild territory where kids can rediscover the power of writing" (p. 39), inviting students to expand seed ideas, enhance skills, complete drafts, and reflect on techniques. However, I wondered, *How do students view SSW?*

At the suburban-rural middle school where I taught, I conducted informal, action research surveying 211 academic and advanced seventh graders from September 2016 to June 2018. All student names are pseudonyms. Students communicated their initial reactions to writing in beginning-of-the-year questionnaires, and in June I asked them to reflect on their SSW experiences. I coded their answers, allowing trends to emerge. I analyzed if and how their writing supported their survey answers. Interviews provided a fuller picture of students' writing processes and views of the assignment. Lastly, classroom observations enabled me to record student-teacher conferences as well as student-student conversations (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001).

To kick off SSW, we started with a two-week unit in October. Quick Writes (Kittle, 2008) and Writing Territories (Atwell, 1998/2014) inspired student possibilities. Modeling facilitated the selection process; I talked through my own ideas, explored my notebook entries, thought aloud to demonstrate how I focused my piece, and drafted alongside my adolescent writers. I exposed my writing process, so students could develop their own. During small-group and one-on-one conferences, I asked students to share stories with me, talk about their passions, and review their collecting. I brainstormed with them, sharing ideas and genres my imagination cooked up as they poured out their thoughts. This collaboration focused their ideas but also allowed for new possibilities to take flight. As students decided on the scope of their pieces, they submitted a document with their topic, genre, audience, and purpose, which held them accountable for their work, as shown in Figure 2. Students rarely wished to abandon a piece; however, when this occurred, we conferenced as they made their final decisions. Before moving forward, students submitted a new Topic and Genre Selection Form. At the end of the unit, students participated in a publishing party and submitted their SSW Piece, which acted as a writing sample.

After October students continued to develop their individualized writing ideas with Fridays being the designated workshop day. Collecting and developing ideas as well as conferencing were foundational to SSW class periods. Mini-lessons emphasized conventions, style, and craft universal to strong writing. While some students explored multiple pieces during each marking period, others dedicated their time to one draft and developed this each week. As students composed, they analyzed their independent reading books as mentor texts (Foley, 2018), which lifted the quality of their writing pieces, as reflected in Figure 3. Additional small-group instruction occurred to assist writers' individual projects. Student-teacher conferences and draft submissions maximized formative feedback before students turned in completed pieces.

Students' Individualized Mentor Texts from their Independent Reading Books	Student Explanations of Observed Techniques and Recommendations for Risk Taking
League of American Traitors "'Doesn't bother me, but it does . . . scare . . . other *people.*' The guy came over and took Jasper's hand" (Landis 73).	Authors use ellipses to show pauses in talking [and build suspense] and use italics to show emphasis of a name or word. I like how the author uses this in *League of American Traitors* because the speaker seems to think about his words and it shows emotions while talking. These techniques will work for you if you either wish to add [voice] to someone's language or add emphasis to a word to make it more noticeable.
The Sea of Monsters "A bone-rattling growl cut through the storm. Behind Grover, at the far end of the block, a shadowy figure loomed" (Riordan 2).	I like the word choice in this, like "bone-rattling" and "cut through". It would have been easy to say the sentence like this: Behind Grover, a shadow let out a scary growl. But honestly, that isn't nearly as exciting, so I like how Riordan amps it up.
Fever 1793 "Rouse yourself this instant!" (Anderson 1).	I appreciate the voice in this phrase. Specifically, the word, "rouse," [because] it is not a very current word. Therefore, I appreciate the use of this word in the book because it enhances the setting of the book and makes it seem more *real*. I highly recommend doing this because it is a technique for those trying to convey an emotion like fear, anger, joy, etc. while maintaining a certain time period.
Emotional Intelligence "Schooling the Emotions" "'*The main hope of a nation lies in the proper education of its youth.*' –Erasmus" (Goleman 261).	In the informational book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, every chapter heading is followed by a quote. . . . This technique works great if you want to add credibility to your piece or put it in a real-world context. It also allows for further thinking about the chapter in question as a whole and overall serves as a comprehensive method of summarizing your content. I appreciate this specifically here because the whole book is information and insight, and something as solid as a quote is what gets you to actually think about it.
The Fault in Our Stars "'I can only hope,' Julie said, turning back to Gus, 'they grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you've become'" (Green 251).	I selected this part of the book because of the author's techniques and description. In this sentence I liked how the writer exhibited the writing style of having two adjectives that are separated by a comma. This stood out to me since early this year as a class we were learning about this effective technique.

Figure 3. Student-selected mentor texts. This figure provides examples of how students select craft and convention techniques from their independent reading books that they would like to emulate in their own writing.

At the end of each marking period, students finished "best drafts" and final self-assessments (Atwell, 1998/2014; Mahoney, 2002), which served as summative grades for this assignment. Reflections consisted of six to nine short-answer questions (Figure 4) that prompted students' thinking and checked their understanding of new concepts. They included excerpts from their "best drafts" to showcase their ability and think deeply about what they accomplished. I recycled questions throughout the year that asked students to consider their individualized learning processes. Other questions were marking period-specific since they focused on skills we studied during SSW mini-lessons and whole-class genre studies. Furthermore, peer conferences and publishing parties enabled middle schoolers to share their work and celebrate their achievements.

Navigating Genre

Completing self-directed writing pieces with choice in topic *and* genre emerged as one of the most important themes from my action research. Students differentiated SSW from one-time free writes and prompt responses, as well as genre study brainstorming. Instead, SSW enabled them to write rough, develop further, and then determine form. While students enjoyed Low-Stakes Writing (Fletcher, 2017),"the kind of [informal,] comfortable composing kids do when they know there's no one looking over their shoulder" (p. 39), they yearned to refine initial ideas. Their words echoed Penny Kittle's (2008) belief that quick writing is not merely enough for students to grow into strong, confident, articulate writers. Ed, a seventh grader, shared:

> [SSW] is different than other types of writing that we do because usually when you get to choose what you want to write about, it is only for that class and you don't get to continue revising, editing, and publishing the piece.

By re-examining their notebooks, students questioned how they could use their own ideas to create something original. SSW offered an outlet for adolescent writers to discover their interests and convey their personalities as they wrestled with the writing process.

Often the writing-reading workshop permitted students to determine their topics during genre studies, required essays, and assigned projects, yet this still limited choice. They explained that in the past they were unable to pursue topics that did not match a specific genre study. However, in our class they explored their favorite notebook entries during SSW's individualized writing time. Joy observed, "In other . . . classes, we have everything laid out for us on how our project is supposed to look. Everything is predictable in the other

writing pieces, but with Self-Selected, we get to go in any direction we want." It offered students the chance to work on their craft in addition to the form of the writing. The author and teacher, Donald M. Murray (1984/2009) commented on this uncertainty being of utmost importance in his 1984 article, "Writing Badly to Write Well." He posited:

We run the danger of closing down thinking, exploration, and discovery if we pay too much attention to genre at the wrong time. The line will lead us to the form. And should. And our students must have the experience of writing what they do not expect to write (p. 113).

Through self-reflection and guidance from their peers and teacher, students learned to listen to where their words could lead them. As students navigated the unexpected and grappled with the right mode to match their visions, they saw this challenge as "fun." Their intentional play converted into rigorous and relevant work, providing a platform for students to practice writing in a meaningful, student-centered manner.

The more success students experienced, the more pride they took in their work and in themselves. Students felt capable with SSW because they found victory even in failure. Michelle divulged how SSW increased her confidence as it strengthened her writing ability:

> We learn in writing through trial and error. . . In the beginning of this year, I tried writing a fictional piece . . . I failed miserably. I couldn't get the words and phrases to sound right; it was just a mess. Now, I am writing a new realistic fiction piece that I am proud of. Point being: you learn something new each time you write on your own accord.

Because students tackled a variety of self-chosen writing tasks and manipulated language and genre to serve their own purposes, they built resilience. SSW encouraged independence while teaching craft, conventions, and the modes of writing: narrative, descriptive, expositive, and argumentative (Ray, 2006, p. 54), which sustained students' activated writerly lives and prepared them for real-life writing experiences.

SSW's weekly structure invited students to tap into their writing zone: a state where they were entirely absorbed in the writing process. Through diligent, hard work and extended periods of time, students experienced heightened concentration. They looked forward to the continual balance of challenges and

Writing Process Questions
What are you most proud of in this writing piece? Include textual evidence from your writing. Explain your reasoning.
Identify a technique you used to enhance your writing piece. Write the sentence(s) that demonstrates the technique and explain how the technique improved your writing.
What specific feedback are you looking for in your SSW Piece? If it pertains to a specific section, highlight the section in your document before uploading it.
How did you revise your SSW? Include specific changes with an explanation of why you made them.
Explain your writing process. What was the most difficult part? What did you find the most enjoyable?
What do you want to work on more or improve in your writing piece? Include the sentence or section from your SSW.
What writing risk(s) did you take? Include textual evidence from your writing. Explain how the risk is a risk to you. Also, answer at least two of the following questions to develop your paragraph. Was the risk worth taking? What did it feel like to take a risk? Why did you decide to take this risk? Will you take this risk in the future? How did the risk help or hurt your piece?
Specific Marking Period Questions
Did the dialogue punctuation minilesson help your writing? Why or why not?
Did you include an em dash? Explain why or why not? If you did, please include it here.
Were you able to include a hyphenated adjective? Why or why not? If you did, please include it here.
Did you included research to enhance your writing? Why or why not? Include specific sentences from your piece that were enhanced.

Figure 4. Reflection questions. This figure depicts questions to prompt metacognitive thinking during and after the writing process.

triumphs that SSW afforded because they experienced flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained, "The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times. . . . The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p. 3). Students loved SSW because they entered into this realm that they so often did not discover in the ELA classroom.

For instance, Claire revealed her dedication to her four-part book: "I was working on a piece from October to about March, which shows how passionate I was (and still am) about this Self-Selected Writing." The ambitious process offered immense rewards for her and her friends, who longed to read each sequel. By allotting time for students to tap into their individual interests and persevere through difficult writing moments, they became emotionally invested in their SSW work. Although a school assignment, they were no longer driven solely by teacher expectations and grades but by their own intrinsic motivation and level of creativity. Students found personal enjoyment from it and wanted to continue creating the feelings of accomplishment and contentment.

Overcoming Obstacles

When compared to previous generations, my middle-level students engaged with alarming amounts of technology, participated in fewer face-to-face interactions, and were more likely to be lonely, depressed, and suicidal (Twenge, 2017). With trying experiences and mental illnesses plaguing adolescents, SSW gave them the chance to use words to make sense of their lives. My students shared: "I have discovered what types of writing make me feel calm [and] what helps me get my stress out," "It [is] . . . a break in the day to relax and write," and "When I'm writing essay on top of essay, Self-Selected keeps me sane." Writing, in a safe environment, empowered individuals to express, reflect, and move beyond difficult life situations (Smyth, 1998; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Because SSW provided consistent opportunities for teens to communicate what mattered most to them, they formed a trusting relationship with their writing.

As a result, SSW became a cathartic activity that students employed in the classroom and at home. One seventh grader focused on his parents' divorce through poetry, another student described the emotions surrounding the incarceration of her mother, and another searched for a way to conquer her anxiety disorder. Jackie explored bullying and suicide in her short stories. She wanted to raise awareness of these pervasive issues, offer her peers a way to overcome these hardships, and encourage them to find the necessary help. At the same time, she hoped to influence middle schoolers to stop being bystanders and bullying each other. For Mike, SSW helped him cope with the passing of a loved one: "It is a time to work/relax while writing a piece of your own choice. . . . I like to write poems and express my thoughts and feelings in them. I have never done this until this year for Self-Selected, and I found out that I love it." His poetry aided in his healing process and inspired other students when he shared his work in class.

John's spoken word poetry moved the entire class to applause after his publishing party performance. His writing focused on his relationship with his dad, the impact of alcoholism, and how he would rise above these struggles. In his survey he explained:

> Self-Selected Writing is great because it just gives you the time to not stress, but to relax, and to write about whatever you want. . . . It helps me be who I want to be because I'm writing raps in this class, and without Self-Selected Writing, I wouldn't be able to write any of my raps now.

With SSW Mike and John thrived in class which led to drastic shifts in their academic personas. They both started the school year as shy, reluctant, disengaged students who struggled to stay focused and be an active member of our class. By the end of the year, they sought out ways to be involved. Although their transformation was unexpected, it was not surprising that they perceived SSW as a means to overcoming obstacles and finding peace since research (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002) suggests that "writing about stressful or traumatic events is related to improvements in self-reported health, psychological well-being, physiological functioning, and general functioning" (p. 244). Without a dedicated day for SSW each week, my students would have been robbed of these crucial writing experiences.

Discussion

While students identified SSW as their favorite part of class because they experienced an increase in creative freedom, their final products revealed growth. Ownership and choice nudged writers to experiment with difficult techniques and spend additional time revising and editing. Students shared: "I have learned that when I want to write about something, I will make it the best that I can because I want to 'prove' that I'm better at writing than it seems," "Self-Selected gives us a sense of freedom to try new techniques at our own leisure," and "The best part is publishing since you get to show off your writing skills with classmates." Students made it clear that controlling a piece's topic *and* genre enabled them to take risks in other areas of their writing and develop their abilities further. Their work and unanimously positive feedback conveyed SSW's power as a pivotal component to students' educational experiences and continued success.

Even students who struggled found SSW worthwhile. For instance, Connor devoured fictional, survival books and spent most of his time outdoors, biking, hiking, and fishing. When it came to writing he lacked organization and detail, but he liked to tell stories. He shared, "It is nice to write about something that you want to write about" because "it lets you know who you are" and "it's fun." During SSW, we worked together to bring his nature writing to life. Talking through his ideas and studying independent mentor texts (Foley, 2018) helped Connor elaborate with sensory details, emotions, and dialogue.

He also worked on organizing his adventure story into paragraphs and his fishing poem into lines and stanzas. Choice pushed Connor to improve his writing.

Another student, Sara, also loved to write stories but found it difficult to develop her ideas. She often created the opening hook and then abandoned it for another piece. Although she wrote with strong emotion and detail, her conventions and dialogue punctuation made her writing difficult to read. Our conferences focused on developing her storylines and understanding grammar rules. In the third and fourth marking periods, she finished two different stories: one scary and dystopian, the other realistic and about friendship. Her SSW pieces were directly influenced by the independent reading books she read, and by June, she saw herself as a reader and writer.

SSW did not erase student difficulties, but instead made the writing process accessible to all writers. Through differentiated instruction and one-on-one conferences, my most at-risk seventh graders prevailed and turned in products that they were proud of.

Moreover, my students voiced how SSW helped them to understand the benefits of writing outside of the classroom; they saw real-world value in writing and began to think about how it would help them in the future. Piper explained, "Self-Selected Writing helps you develop as a writer because you get to see what type of writing you like to write and you can use that in the future," and Elizabeth articulated:

> I like Self-Selected Writing because it's more interesting to write than if we're assigned a specific topic or genre. It . . . helps us to think more creatively [and critically]. If we're always assigned what topic to write, people who want to pursue their writing careers may struggle to come up with their own [future] ideas because ideas aren't being given to them.

SSW challenged students to view writing as a way to express their thoughts and share their views. They no longer perceived writing as only a school assignment; instead, writing became a means to better understand their lives and the worlds they live in.

Reflection

Since its initial implementation, SSW evolved within my classroom. In response to the survey question, "What can I do to make SSW better?" students asked for more time throughout the month, and especially before turning in their final products. They appreciated having SSW every week but wanted more workshop days to complete peer conferences and "best drafts." To make this a reality, the last week of the marking period and the first week of the new marking period were dedicated to completing the writing process. Instead of SSW's summative grades (writing process completion and metacognitive reflection) being the last grade of the marking period, it became the first grade for the new marking period.

Additionally, SSW as Back Up Work (Ray, 2006) Monday through Thursday became more of a focal point in our class. When students finished a whole-class text or genre study, they chose whether to read their independent reading books or develop their SSW Pieces. One student even suggested having 15 minutes of SSW time each day in addition to or as an option during daily independent reading time. To accomplish this goal and differentiate my instruction, students began deciding whether they read or wrote during the first 10-15 minutes of class. If students stopped meeting their reading goals, we conferenced and developed a plan to get them back on track.

During the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school year, students gained more class periods to revise, work with peers, have student-teacher conferences, and receive formative feedback. This time in conjunction with our district's one-to-one laptop initiative and our learning management system (Canvas) made editing conferences more effective and efficient. Students began turning in "best drafts" for final editing. After marking up their pieces, I reviewed conventions during one-on-one conferences. If overarching errors surfaced, I conducted whole-class mini-lessons. Because students were intrinsically motivated by their SSW pieces, they saw value in editing and resubmitting their final products.

Technology also changed the writing that students submitted. Students used WeVideo to create commercials, videos, digital presentations, plays, and podcasts. Co-writing became a possibility with Office 365, and they published their work with the entire class using the discussion board feature in Canvas. Moreover, the computers encouraged cross-curricular integration as students used Canva, Sway, and Venngage (which they learned in Social Studies, Science, and Integrated Technology) to make infographics, picture books, and newspapers. Students even sought out new technology or reimagined familiar applications to meet their needs. For example, after a mini-lesson and book talk on epistolary novels, students experimented with letters, emails, and text messages in their writing pieces using Word, PowerPoint, and online text message generators.

Concluding Remarks

Each year, I strive to make SSW relevant for my students based on their feedback, new technological enhancements, and my own evolving philosophy of education. Choice writing has been an integral part of my class for over a decade, teaching me to listen to my students and to never become stagnant.

Looking ahead, we may consider reflecting on Heather Lattimer's (2003) words: "We need to ensure that the pendulum does not swing back to prescribed reading curriculum with genre studies simply replacing the basal anthology as the course requirement" (p. 6). I have found that teacher-generated assignments alone stifle middle schoolers' potential. For educators, interested in fostering the writerly lives of their students, SSW evokes self-expression, investigation, imagination, and innovation, leaving an indelible imprint on adolescent learning.

I encourage teachers to overcome the constraints of curriculum requirements, mandated testing, and limited exposure to writing-reading workshop pedagogy that too often shackle them to a genre-study-grammar-skill-and-drill-project-based-novel-centered approach

to the teaching of writing. While some ELA classes have begun to carve out space for choice writing (Ray, 2006; Whitney, Ridgeman, & Masquelier, 2011), an isolated study each marking period or one unit during the school year is only the beginning. With SSW each Friday, students' independent writing acts as a driving, motivational force. During each marking period, they transfer their knowledge from whole-class mini-lessons and assignments; practice their skills, craft, and voice; and metacognitively reflect on their techniques. Simultaneously, SSW Fridays privilege choice so that students consistently wrestle with their ideas, play with genre, experiment with language, express their voices, and determine the writers they wish to be. SSW is a lifeline, enabling my students to enjoy writing and find success.

Last year a parent shared the transformation of her son, Dave. He had never liked to write, but SSW changed that completely. Dave became an engaged writer and active participant in class. He spurred the creation of our school's writing club, promoting writing for the entire school. SSW fueled his passion for science and technology and empowered him to verbalize his dream: to discover the cure for blood cancers.

Dave exemplifies the students I meet who will embark on a journey of self-discovery and are forever influenced by Self-Selected Writing. By placing student choice at the heart of ELA classrooms—even just one day a week—teachers and SSW profoundly impact students' personal and academic lives.

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About the Author

After graduating from The College of New Jersey, Lauren Heimlich Foley taught at Roy W. Brown Middle School for five years in Bergenfield, New Jersey. She relocated with her husband to Pennsylvania and is in her fifth year of teaching English Language Arts in the Central Bucks School District. Lauren became a Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project (PAWLP) fellow in 2017 and is completing her master's degree at West Chester University. Her research interests include student choice, the writing-reading workshop, independent reading books as mentor texts, student empowerment, and digitizing the writing-reading workshop.